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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews "The Status of the American Public School Teacher, 1985-86," a report on a survey conducted by the National Education Association (NEA), with the aim of locating specific results or findings in that report that have implications for future research on the teaching profession. Periodic surveys of school teachers conducted by the NEA are a valuable source of trend data and baseline estimates of demographics, working conditions, and attitudes. The most important implication for future research is that the NEA surveys could be used to disaggregate trends and to present more refined estimates of change in the teaching profession. The three most important issues confronting educational policy during the next decade concern: (1) the nature and meaning of attrition; (2) the quality and qualifications of the teaching force; and (3) appropriate responses to teacher shortages at the state and local level. More refined research based on NEA teacher surveys, and complemented by both qualitative studies of teaching and school organization and longitudinal studies of career mobility, are required to address these issues. (JD)

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# STATUS OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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April, 1988

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STATUS OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this session is to review the status of The Status of the American Public School Teacher; my task, is to locate the specific results or findings in the 1986 report that have implications for future research on the teaching profession. Perhaps the most fruitful way to begin is to comment on how the past NEA reports have influenced research on teachers to date, and in particular how my own on-going research has developed and been informed by these reports.

The periodic surveys of the American public school teacher conducted by NEA are unique and invaluable sources of trend data and baseline estimates of demographics, of working conditions and of attitudes. Although a number of states have conducted surveys of teachers, or used state-level data to estimate the supply of teachers or to project potential shortages,[1] there are no other national surveys of teachers of comparable scope and depth. Census data can be assembled, to estimate retention or salary levels,[2] but given the changes in the definition of teachers over time, the growth of pre-schools and pre-school teachers, and the increase of private schooling, the NEA reports remain the best source of national data on the public school teacher. The technical documentation of the surveys, as well as the number of citations to the

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[1] See for example, Cagampang et al. for California; Connecticut State Dept of Education (1985); Florida State Department of Education (1985); Illinois State Board of Education (1985); Louisiana State Department of Education (1982); New Jersey State Department of Higher Education and Department of Education (1983); New York State Department of Education (1985). A useful overview of issues can be found in Sweet and Jacobsen (1983) or Darling-Hammond (1986).

[2] See, for example, Talbert (1986).

reports found in the literature are indicative of the usefulness of the materials. Not only are the statistical summaries widely used, but the sections presenting highlights of the reports are useful. As most educational researchers know, such reading is typically extraordinarily dry; to produce text and graphics of the quality found in the NEA reports represent a major accomplishment.

Second, the construction and organization of the questionnaire used by NEA through the years has become the model for how to develop questions for teachers. A number of national studies of teachers, from the High School and Beyond Survey to the NLS-72 Teaching Supplement data have liberally borrowed both the wording and the interpretations of specific items from the NEA questionnaire. Moreover, comparisons between the resulting distributions and those provided in the NEA reports allow one to assess possible biases in other samples of teachers that are, by necessity. less rigorously chosen. The single question on whether a respondent would or would not choose to be a teacher again if he or she could start over has become the most commonly used indicator of teacher morale. Perhaps no other survey instrument has been "lifted" as frequently for use in other research contexts. Moreover, through great foresight, NEA has maintained the phrasing and reporting of questions over time, despite temptations to be "trendy". Such foresight means that the data constitute an enviable resource for trend analyses and time series, matched by no other survey of professionals available in this country. By resisting trendy questions, NEA has assembled a data base that truly measures trends.

Faced with such successes, one can recommend expanding the survey only with a certain amount of temerity. Perhaps every researcher in the

business has written that "more research is needed" at least once during his or her career; however, since more research typically involves more and different variables, changing the sampling frame or the questionnaire could mean reducing comparability with past surveys and would, therefore, be a some sacrifice of the predominant merits of the NEA survey. The virtues to be found in the NEA surveys of teachers suggest that even small changes in the sampling design or the wording of questions might be catastrophic for the analysis of trends. Hence, to discuss the implications for future research based on The Status of the American Public School Teacher, 1985-86, one must be certain to state at the outset that future research should involve studies that compete with neither the sampling nor the funding for this report.

That stated, what suggestions for further research seem most fruitful, and how would one conduct such studies? The single most important implication for future research is that the NEA surveys could be used to disaggregate trends and to present more refined estimates of change in the teaching profession than can be gleaned from the report. Despite a large number of tabulations based on the data over time, the specific breakdowns one looks for are too often not available. One can find age by level of education taught, but not age and level by attitudes toward the profession or professional experience. Moreover, since a great deal is known about the relationships between age or experience and other characteristics of teachers, multivariate modelling would clearly be in order.

In short, there is an enormous amount of additional research that could be undertaken with the survey materials presently available. I suspect a large number of researchers would be enthusiastic about the prospect of creating files that could be used for additional research.

Given the historical dimension to the data, these survey results are treasure of information about the profession that should be available as a national archive. Much like the census provides subsamples of data for specific research questions, NEA might offer a public use sample to the educational research community for further research. Although constructing a public use tape from the 1986 survey, or combining the most recent results with prior surveys would represent a major commitment of time and resources, it would be an invaluable source of information on change in the profession during the last twenty years. I suspect the resources for such an endeavor could be assembled. If NEA were to sponser a small working conference on data availability, I am certain literally hundreds of possible studies with clear implications for policy would be suggested. And I suspect that a proposal based on these possibilities for research would have no difficulty in getting funding.

It is clear, for example, that the profession as a whole has aged during the last decade, as well as become relatively more experienced. It is also clear that the qualifications and training of teachers has undergone substantial change. Peng (1982) and Roberson, Keith, and Page (1983) concluded that the academic qualifications of undergraduates aspiring to enter teaching had declined, based on comparisons between the 1972 NLS cohort and the High School and Beyond seniors graduating in 1980. The test scores of all entering freshmen, have declined during the same period; however, it seems that they have declined the most for potential teachers. It would seem that as the numbers of students interested in a career in education has decreased, so has the academic abilities of those wishing to enter. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1986) found more encouraging results for recent years. The gap between

national SAT scores and those of prospective education majors widened between 1973 and 1982; however, since 1982, it has narrowed.

In a host of recent publications, the fear has been expressed that a steady erosion of talent in the profession is underway. Such fears are expressed, as is usually the case in education, in terms of an impending crisis amounting to a national emergency. Attrition, not coincidentally, has become a major concern at precisely the same moment we have discovered potential teacher shortages in areas such as math, science, and computer technology that are central to our competitive industrial position internationally. Shortages in specific fields, such as math, science and computer training are longstanding, although they have been exacerbated by recently mandated increases in requirements for graduation.

The factors that are assumed to explain the distribution of teacher shortages are changes in the demographic and intellectual composition of students, and changes in the general "quality" of schools. Although estimates of the seriousness of shortages vary considerably, attrition is presumed to be the major cause of teacher shortages, although curricular changes and an upgrading of standards are clearly involved. Shortages of special education teachers, bilingual teachers, and teachers for preschools reflect increases in the demand for these types of education for certain kinds of children. Unfilled positions in the West, or in the sunbelt generally, reflect population shifts. Shortages in urban areas that are losing population, such as ghetto schools and the inner city, are assumed to be based on attrition and the declining quality of the schools.

Educational policy in the 1990s must move beyond student evaluation or accountability. The issues that are most essential for the future are

clearly linked to the staffing and organization of schools, rather than merely to student outcomes. Moreover, we must begin to take account of the opinions of teachers, and the career patterns and mobility options of the teaching force. Educational research has operated for too long on the naive assumptions that schools were "black boxes", with inputs and outcomes that could be assessed independently of pedagogical content or the attitudes and feelings of the people in the trenches, so to speak. The realization that teachers are critical to the educational process is not new, but it has typically been honored in the breach. The question that strikes me as most central for any educational study is how to use and incorporate the knowledge and expertise of the classroom teacher into an understanding of schooling.

To my mind, the three most important issues confronting educational policy during the next decade concern 1) the nature and meaning of attrition 2) the quality and qualifications of the teaching force and 3) appropriate responses to teacher shortages at the state and local level. To each of these issues, the NEA publications bring a wealth of data and information that are not available from any other source. More refined research based on these teacher surveys, and complemented by both qualitative studies of teaching and school organization and longitudinal studies of career mobility, are required to address these issues.

Let me illustrate the importance of each of these issues in turn, by drawing on my own research. First, how should one understand attrition in the profession. As a profession, teaching has always been characterized by very high rates of turnover, substantial attrition, and many late entrants. It is ironic that teacher retention has become an issue in education at a point in time in which most analysts believe that attrition

has declined markedly.[3] Data from the fifth follow-up of the high school class of 1972, provide a useful comparison to retropsective data. Using census data from 1970, Talbert (1986) estimated the proportion of teachers in 1965 who were still teaching in 1970 at 63%. Among young teachers, those twenty-five years of age or less, about half of those teaching in 1965 remained in the stable teaching force, defined as those who were teachers in both 1965 and 1970. Among men the estimated attrition rate for teachers who were less than 25 years of age was .48, while for young women it was .50. Comparable figures for the National Longitudinal Study cohort, which turned 25 in 1979 [4], suggest substantially less attrition. For those who had taught at least one year between 1977 and 1980, the proportions teaching five years later, are presented in Table 1, by year and sex. In no year, neither for men nor for women, were the rates of attrition as high as those calculated by Talbert for the earlier period. These comparisons suggest that retention has improved, and improved more dramatically for women than for men, over the last twelve to fifteen years, at least for young teachers. It is frequently argued that one source of attrition among women teachers is the expanding number of opportunities for professional careers; however, an even more important source of retention is the increased likelihood of women persisting in the careers they have started.

Attrition is not necessarily related to teacher shortages, although this may sound somewhat paradoxical. In the NLS-72 surveys, fully one-

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[3] Weaver (1983) presents the most comprehensive data on this point. Estimates of attrition typically range between 5-8% annually, based on all teachers. The NLS teachers had quite high rates during their first three years, followed by a relative plateau.

[4] Eighty-five percent of the NLS teachers were born in 1954, 10.5% were born in 1953 and the remainder in either 1952 or 1955.

third of the teachers who left teaching at some point during the decade between 1977-1986 returned to the classroom later. Moreover, the teachers who left often returned with graduate training or advanced degrees that arguably enhanced their teaching. Teachers who had left and re-entered were on the average more satisfied with their chosen careers than those who did not leave, and tended to be among the most talented members of the profession. We are accustomed to thinking that teachers who leave are disgruntled, burnt-out, or seeking more lucrative careers outside of education. In fact, former teachers, and particularly those who re-enter the profession, are far less disaffected than one might suppose. These patterns suggest that teacher career patterns are critical as an explanation of career satisfaction. In particular, although teacher satisfaction is related to the kinds of schools in which teachers are employed, the relationship between quality of school and attrition is inverse.

Teacher attrition tends to be inversely related to the characteristics of schools alleged to enhance teacher satisfaction. Private schools, whether religious or not, have higher rates of attrition than do public schools. Suburban schools lose more teachers every year than do the schools located in urban areas; rural schools lose the least of all. Large schools tend to have lower rates of attrition than small or medium-sized schools. Secondary school teachers are far more likely to leave the profession than elementary school teachers, although few would argue that elementary schools are better or more professionalized places to teach. Former teachers report that their students were of high or average ability, and from upper or upper middle class families, more often then current teachers do. Although the differences by race are not

significant, it is clear that current teachers are more likely to teach minority pupils in minority schools than former teachers were.

Rates of attrition by type of school are presented in Table 2. It is clear that the teachers leaving the profession are not refugees from the worst problem schools in the country. Rather, they teach or have taught in some of the most privileged segments of education. Private schools, schools in which most of the pupils are upper or upper-middle class and of high ability, and schools that are located in suburban areas have higher rates of attrition than those enrolling poor or lower ability students, or those located in urban areas. All of the comparisons, except that for racial composition, as noted above, are significant. Moreover, the differences are quite robust. The measure of retention used is the ratio of teachers in the category who identify themselves as former to the total number who entered teaching and taught in the schools in question. This rate reflects the proportion of teachers who left without returning, or at least had not returned by 1986. It is a measure of attrition from the profession, not merely a measure of turnover between schools. Measures of turnover from specific types of schools typically confound attrition with transfers between schools.

These results suggest a number of possible ways in which teacher attrition might be viewed. Perhaps better schools allow leaves and re-entry more routinely for educational or personal growth. Perhaps the teachers who choose to leave and re-enter have sources of income that are not available to the average teacher. It does seem clear, however, that attrition is not a function of the worst educational environments. Moreover, the teachers who have taken or been given leaves are, by

conventional measures, among the most talented individuals in the profession.

Most studies of attrition have found that the teachers leaving the field were "better" or more qualified than those that remained. The conventional measures of "better" are college grades or achievement test scores, or the scores obtained on the National Teaching Examination.[5] These patterns, combined with the fact that education majors are typically not found at the top of their class, have suggested to numerous analysts that the major problem in education is teacher quality. As the number of college freshmen choosing education as a major has declined, so has their average scholastic ability relative to all undergraduates.[6] High attrition, particularly among teachers with relatively high test scores, is worrisome. Weaver (1983), among others, argues that the issue is marketability; teachers with the talent and credentials can and do find more lucrative employment outside the academy. Increasing opportunities for women and minorities, and the declining attractiveness of schools as work places are argued to exacerbate these trends.

Attrition, however, does not represent a hemorrhaging of talent from our schools. Data from the National Longitudinal Study do not altogether disprove the talent loss theory, they surely moderate some of the more pressing concerns. The teaching sample as a whole tended to come from

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[5] See, for example, Schlechty and Vance (1981 and 1983), Vance and Schlechty (1982) and Darling-Hammond (1984). Some conflicting evidence is reported by the National Commission for Excellence in Teacher Education (1985).

[6] See, for example, Peng (1982) and Roberson, Keith, and Page (1983) for data based on comparisons between the 1972 NLS cohort and the High School and Beyond seniors graduating in 1980. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1986) found more encouraging results for recent years. The gap between national SAT scores and those of prospective education majors widened between 1973 and 1982; however, since 1982, it has narrowed.

lower socioeconomic backgrounds compared to all college graduates in the cohort, and they scored less well on standardized tests both in high school and later. They were more likely to attend public universities or colleges, rather than private ones, and they were less likely to graduate in four years. The sample who became teachers scored less well on standardized tests then those who were trained but never entered.

These issues of selectivity, however, concern teacher recruitment. Once employed, the patterns of attrition suggest quite different phenomena at work. On average, the former teachers have a slight edge on current teachers, in terms of both socioeconomic background and tested ability. Current teachers tended to receive higher grades in both high school and college, however, and they were significantly more likely to have earned a masters degree since graduating. Former teachers, including all those who had ever left, scored slightly better than current teachers on SAT tests and on high school achievement tests in math and slightly worse on tests of verbal skill. These differences, however, are quite small and invariably insignificant. Current teachers are more likely than former teachers to have high grades, to have entered graduate training; a significantly larger proportion has earned a master's degree.

If we compare current and former teachers, and in particular look at career patterns and re-entry, the results are distinctly more mixed. Teachers entering the profession late, after other job experience, are more talented (again assuming that test scores in high school and SAT scores measure academic talent) than teachers entering directly after college. Moreover, teachers taking breaks from teaching, but re-entering at a later time, tend to score higher than those who have never left.

Finally, former teachers who want to return to the classroom tend to score more highly than those who do not want to return.[7]

Table 3 presents the mean SAT scores for the National Longitudinal Study teachers who were teaching in a given year and the level of schooling taught. No clear trends are evident over time. These results suggest it is premature to assume that attrition necessarily depletes the profession of the most talented teachers, even if the most talented teachers are more likely to leave. Those who enter late, or return after a break, or want to return in the future, tend to raise the averages for current teachers.

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Table 3 About Here

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The contrast between early and late entrants is particularly surprising.[8] One would expect that late entrants would include a heavy concentration of students that graduated from college later than their peers, perhaps due to financial or academic difficulty in college. Among the late entry teachers, about half took more than four years to graduate; however, a larger number entered with graduate training and advanced degrees as well. Late entry teachers, like those that re-entered, were

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[7] The results for the former teachers are based on smaller samples, and hence are not significant. The patterns are consistent with the general findings, however, and for that reason are reported.

[8] Although these results are surprising, they are not unique in the literature. Pavalko (1970), for example, studied a cohort of 1957 high school graduates from Wisconsin, who were followed up in 1964. He reports that late entry teachers tended to have the highest ability of all those entering teaching.

also more likely to have children than was true of current teachers as a whole. For many teachers, entering the profession late appears to be equivalent to taking an early break from teaching, to pursue educational credentials or to start families or both.

The composition of the pool of late entry and re-entry teachers suggests a second explanation of these patterns. Teachers entering after 1980 were more likely to come from relatively more advantaged families; moreover, late entry teachers tended to have higher than average family incomes in both 1985 and 1986. This is also true of the teachers who had taken breaks between 1977 and 1986. It seems likely that the some measure of economic security is a prerequisite for leaving education.[9] Such correlates help to explain, at least in part, the higher test scores. One of the unique aspects of teaching as a profession is that it tends to allow individuals with the motivation---and the wherewithal---to take extended leaves. Teachers who chose to exercise this option were disproportionately drawn from groups more privileged socioeconomically and from nearer the top of the ability distribution, rather than the bottom.

Such results can perhaps mitigate fears that the attrition of high quality teachers means the inevitable decline of teaching quality, at least in the aggregate. However, it is still the case that those leaving teaching are likely to be more "qualified" on average than those who remain. Teaching can be an exhausting and stressful business; it is not surprising that teachers who can afford to do so, choose to take leaves or breaks from teaching. The teachers who report the most satisfaction with

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[9] One could also argue that as the decade progressed, getting a teaching job became harder; hence those who entered at successively later dates were more select. The evidence is rather sparse on this point; there were no trends in the test scores of teachers by year of entry after 1981.

teaching are those who have either entered late or taken breaks during their tenure. Retaining highly qualified teachers may involve providing sources of revitalization and renewal outside the classroom, such as paid sabbaticals. Ironically, the teachers who have the most access to leaves, or at least choose to use them the most often, teach or have taught in some of the most privileged educational environments.

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Table 1. Proportions of National Longitudinal Study Sample Teaching between 1976-1980, by year, and Five Years Later, by Sex*

| | Male Teachers | Female Teachers | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| Proportion of those teaching in 1976-77 who also taught in 1981-82 | 53.7 | 65.6 | 62.9 |
| Proportion of those teaching in 1977-78 who also taught in 1982-83 | 59.5 | 61.1 | 60.7 |
| Proportion of those teaching in 1978-79 who also taught in 1983-84 | 61.7 | 62.8 | 62.6 |
| Proportion of those teaching in 1979-80 who also taught in 1984-85 | 72.9 | 68.9 | 69.9 |

*In 1976, the cohort was approximately twenty-two years of age.

Table 2. Teacher Satisfaction and Rate of Attrition by School Characeristics: National Longitudinal Study, 1986

| School Characteristics* | Proportion who would certainly or probably be teachers if they could do it again (Current teachers) | Rate of Attrition (Former teachers / All experienced teachers) |
|---|---|---|
| *Level of Instruction* | | |
| Secondary Schools (including junior high & middle schools) | 48.3 | .508 |
| Elementary Schools | 60.5 | .409 |
| *Control of School* | | |
| Public | 54.2 | .401 |
| Parochial | 65.9 | .621 |
| Private | 79.9 | .624 |
| *School Location* | | |
| Rural | 59.0 | .404 |
| Urban | 52.9 | .435 |
| Suburban | 56.5 | .579 |
| *Racial Composition* | | |
| All White (less than 10% minority) | 59.0 | .475 |
| Integrated (10-60% minority) | 57.0 | .439 |
| Minority (over 60% minority) | 56.3 | .415 |
| *Economic Status of Students* | | |
| Upper or Upper Middle Class | 54.2 | .503 |
| Lower and Lower Middle Class | 55.6 | .455 |
| Mixed | 63.5 | .377 |
| *Ability Levels of Students* | | |
| High or Average Ability | 58.7 | .491 |
| Low Ability | 54.3 | .441 |
| Mixed | 56.6 | .382 |

*School characteristics are based on teacher reports for the last or most recent school in which they taught. All the differences in attrition, except those for racial composition, are significant ($p \leq .05$). Only the differences by level and control of the school are significant for current teachers.

Table 3. Mean SAT Scores for Experienced Teachers by Level Taught and Year Teaching: National Longitudinal Study, 1986

| Year | Elementary School Teachers | | Secondary School Teachers | | Proportion of Sample Teaching in Specific Years | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SAT Verbal | SAT Math | SAT Verbal | SAT Math | Elementary | Secondary |
| 1976-77 | 439 | 460 | 438 | 499 | .45 | .37 |
| 1977-78 | 440 | 460 | 450 | 497 | .61 | .53 |
| 1978-79 | 435 | 457 | 447 | 495 | .64 | .62 |
| 1979-80 | 432 | 464 | 455 | 513 | .63 | .62 |
| 1980-81 | 433 | 460 | 442 | 502 | .62 | .62 |
| 1981-82 | 426 | 453 | 438 | 487 | .61 | .58 |
| 1982-83 | 433 | 456 | 446 | 502 | .59 | .57 |
| 1983-84 | 436 | 459 | 449 | 495 | .59 | .51 |
| 1984-85 | 438 | 459 | 448 | 487 | .61 | .53 |
| 1985-86 | 437 | 458 | 445 | 493 | .65 | .47 |
| [N] | [182] | [180] | [ 73] | [ 73] | [519] | [250] |